

The background features a stylized illustration of a bright yellow sun in the top right corner, partially obscured by light blue and white clouds. The sky is a gradient of light blue. In the foreground, there are several overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in various shades of blue, creating a layered effect. The main title is written in white on the darkest blue shape.

Reunification as a Permanency Option



Have you ever heard....

“He has his own room at the foster home. Now you expect him to move into a trailer?”

“The child is better off spending the rest of his life in foster care than going back to those parents.”

“If we keep the kids in foster care, they will get to participate in more extracurricular activities.”

“They don’t have a couch. We can’t send these kids home if they don’t have a couch.”



Have you ever heard....

“We need to quit messing around with trying to help these parents. The child needs permanency.”



Permanency

The definition of permanency is a safe, consistent, nurturing, permanent home in which a child can grow to adulthood.



Permanency

This can be the
home the children
were removed from!



Five Alternatives for Permanency

- The child will be returned to the parent
- The child will be placed for adoption and a termination of parental rights petition filed
- The child will be referred for legal guardianship
- The child will be permanently placed with a fit and willing relative
- The child will be placed in another planned permanent living arrangement if a compelling reason has been documented so that the court can determine that it would not be in the child's best interest to be placed according to the prior 4 alternatives.



Reunification

- Reunification is the process of returning children in temporary out-of-home care to their families of origin.
- When children must be removed from their families to ensure their safety, the first goal is to reunite them with their families as soon as possible.
- The longer a child is in care, the less likely it becomes that reunification will occur.



Reunification

- If a child can be protected and served at home, reunification should always be the primary goal.
- Foster care is designed to provide temporary, immediate safety and security to children experiencing abuse and neglect.
- Many children can be kept safely at home with the help of intensive support and community services.



Why Reunification

1 – It's the Law!



W.S. § 14-3-440(a)

Except as provided in W.S. 14-2-309(b) or (c), reasonable efforts shall be made to preserve and reunify the family:

- (i) Prior to placement of the child outside the home, to prevent or eliminate the need for removing the child from the child's home;
and
- (ii) To make it possible for the child to safely



W.S. § 14-3-431(d)

The court shall conduct a permanency hearing no later than twelve (12) months from the date of the child's removal from the home and not less than once every twelve (12) months thereafter if the child remains in out-of-home placement or more frequently as deemed necessary by the court.



W.S. § 14-3-431(j)

At the permanency hearing, the department of family services shall present to the court the efforts made to effectuate the permanency plan for the child, address the options for the child's permanent placement, examine the reasons for excluding other permanency options and set forth the proposed plan to carry out the placement decision, including specific times for achieving the permanency plan. The department of family services shall provide the court a compelling reason for establishing a permanency plan other than reunification, adoption or legal guardianship.



W.S. § 14-3-431(k)

At the permanency hearing, the court shall determine whether the permanency plan is in the best interest of the child and whether the department of family services has made reasonable efforts to finalize the plan. The court shall order the department of family services to take any additional steps necessary to effectuate the terms of the permanency plan.



W.S. § 14-3-431(m)

When a child has been placed in foster care under the responsibility of the state for fifteen (15) of the most recent twenty-two (22) months the state **shall** file a petition to terminate parental rights or seek to be joined as a party to the petition if a petition has been filed by another party, unless:

(i) The child is in the care of a relative;

(ii) **The state agency has documented in the case plan a compelling reason for determining that filing the petition is not in the best interest of the child;** or

family (iii) The state agency has not provided services to the child's deemed to be necessary for the safe return of the child to the home, if reasonable efforts described in W.S. 14-3-440 are required to be made.



Why Reunification

1 – It's the Law!

#2 – It's What's Best for the
Child!



Reunification

- The bedrock assumption underlying child welfare policy is that children are better off if raised by their natural parents
- Parents have the fundamental right to direct the care, custody and control of their children
- Reunification has to remain the primary goal of child welfare services until a permanent decision regarding the parents abilities to carry out their responsibilities can be made



Extended time in foster care leads to.....

- ◊ Poorer outcomes in:

- ◊ Education

- ◊ Employment

- ◊ Mental Health



Barriers to Reunification

- Workforce Staffing/Lack of Consistency
- Biases against families



Safety

≠

Quality

of

Life



Barriers to Reunification

- Substance abuse problems

- Fewer than half of all substance abuse treatment programs provide parenting or family related services.



Barriers to Reunification

- Limited resources
- One parent ready when the other is not
- Delay in putting resources in place
- Lack of qualified service providers



Barriers to Reunification

- Child support and other financial obligations
 - Parents are often unprepared for the financial strain that accompanies reunification



Barriers to Reunification

- Insufficient collaboration
 - Without sufficient guidance and support, reunification is likely to fail.
- Youth behavioral problems



Children with Behavioral Problems

- “My child didn’t have these problems until they entered foster care.”
- Possibility that the behavioral problems are not an effect of the neglect, but a **CONTRIBUTING FACTOR**.
- These are parents who weren’t parenting or parenting the only way they know how.



Risk Factors

- Families with multiple problems have difficulty achieving reunification and receive fewer resources.
- Infants and adolescents are less likely to reunify than children of other ages.



Reduced Odds of Reunification

- Infants
- Adolescents
- Children of color
- Children with behavioral problems
- Neglected
- Parents with Mental Health or Substance Abuse Issues
- Infrequent visits
- Low income
- Previously placed



How to Achieve Reunification

- Begin on day 1! The first sixty (60) days are the most important!



How to Achieve Reunification

- Family engagement
- Minimize Disruption
- Contact, Contact, Contact!
- Parental Input
- Communication



How to Achieve Reunification

- ◊ Placement decision-making
- ◊ Intensive services
- ◊ Foster parent/birth parent collaboration
- ◊ Aftercare services



How to Achieve Reunification

Meaningful and frequent visitation is the single best predictor of safe and lasting reunification!



First Steps for Reunification

- Meaningful and deliberate consideration of a first placement:
 - Family involved discussions
 - Alternatives to placement outside the home
 - Maintaining pre-placement connections
 - Continued involvement of parents
 - Natural resources



First Steps for Reunification

- Early emphasis on reunification as the most desirable permanency goal.
- Family engagement is fundamental to successful reunification.



Family Engagement

- Family team meetings
- Supportive foster parents
- Frequency of Visits
- Family Placement



Family Engagement

- Relationship between the caseworker and the family
- Parent mentor or advocate



Assessing Readiness for Reunification

- # of children
- Mental health
- Youth behavioral/emotional difficulties
- Finances
- Stressors



Predictors of Reunification

Parental compliance with services is one of the most important predictors of reunification.



Priorities for Reunification

- Family Engagement
- Early Services
- Visitation
- Supportive Foster Parents
- Parental decision making